

Seward to Kenai mail trail

by Gary Titus

“A health to the man on the trail this night; may his grub hold out; may his dogs keep their legs; may his matches never misfire” poem first published in 1899 by Jack London.

The unsung hero's of the early years must surely have been the mail carriers who braved the elements to maintain that thin thread of contact with the outside world. During the brief summers mail traveled largely by water, but in the winter large stretches of Cook Inlet became unnavigable due to ice packs and bergs. Kenai might have no mail in or out from December to April, unless it could be carried overland by dog team.

By 1902 the mail delivery system in Alaska had over 2,160 miles of dog sled routes, 460 miles of dog sled and horse routes and 112 miles of railroad. More routes were added every year as gold strikes opened up new country, new towns developed and older towns grew. The longest trail ran from Seward to Nome and was called the Iditarod. A branch of the Iditarod left the trail at Kenai Lake and ran approximately 125 miles over frozen swamps and lakes to the village of Kenai on Cook Inlet. This trail was poorly marked and maintained and traveled through what would become Kenai National Moose Range and later re-named, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

In 1903 a Senate subcommittee visited Alaska and commented on the lack of a comprehensive transportation system. As a result of this visit the task of overseeing construction of roads and trails in this growing Territory was given to a Board of Commissioners. Two years later this became the Alaska Road Commission (ARC). The ARC rapidly became the main player in the development of Alaska's trails and roads, conducting formal surveys and constructing and marking thousands of miles of trails and roads over the next half century.

In the winter of 1923 a reconnaissance of the winter trail from Kenai Lake to Kenai was made by the ARC. This trip was made from Moose Pass to Kenai in four days employing one man as a guide and one dog team consisting of three dogs and one light sled. The route from the west end of Kenai Lake followed a Bureau of Public Roads light wagon road for a distance

of approximately 5 ½ miles along the south bank of the Kenai River. It crossed the river near Schooner Bend, on a bridge constructed in the fall and winter of 1920, the trail continued on the wagon road along the north side of the river for approximately two miles. The trail then ran on a bench above the river for a distance of four miles where at this point the trail turned north and left the river following up a small creek to a long lake (Lower Jean Lake). The trail then crossed a low pass continuing through low swamp and lakes to the Moose River and then down the river to the mouth. From there the trail followed an old native trail to Kenai.

Substantial work was done on the Seward-Kenai Trail following the 1923 reconnaissance. Two new shelter cabins at Mile 19 and Mile 37 respectively, from Kenai were constructed, one old cabin at mile 46 was repaired, 18 miles of new trails cut to a width of nine feet and 27 miles of old trail widened to five feet. The two new 14 x 16 log cabins had one door, two windows, corrugated iron roof, a sheet iron stove, five joints of pipe, and a pole bed, all the comforts of home. The building of the new cabins and repairing the old cabin were done at a cost to the Territory of Alaska of \$750 dollars. After spending a night sleeping directly below a drip in one of these cabins a musher suggested the need for some improvements.

The route wasn't an easy one for the mail carriers who at times had to transport as much as 1200 pounds of mail to Kenai with 600 pounds about the maximum load the dogs could pull over the long and rough trail. The carrier had 30 days to make the round trip but in good conditions he could do the trip in seven to eight days. The game warden for the Kenai Peninsula wrote in his January 1924 report the following; “Seward-Kenai mail carrier had come in previous day, dogs very worn from a long hard trip fighting soft snow and slush ice, carrier came up south side of (Kenai) lake crossing at Black point at much risk to himself and team”

As the population of the Kenai grew, roads where built, and the dogsled transportation was challenged by the airplane. Some improvements on the trail were questioned by the carriers as in an incident in the fall of 1929. The improvement on the trail was a cov-

ered bridge over the Kenai River near Schooner Bend. Just as a crew finished the bridge's fine, weather proof shed, up mushed the Seward-Kenai mail carrier with his string of dogs. The carrier stopped, surveyed the newly completed structure and demanded "how in the blank-blank a man was expected to cross a bridge without any snow on it" the carrier had a record load, including groceries and other commodities and the longer he looked at the bare bridge deck, the less he like it. Finally the workmen hauled snow onto the bridge so the dog team could pull the sled across.

In 1925 the ARC began building airports across Alaska opening a new era of mail delivery. With the loss of mail traffic many trails were inevitably aban-

doned. In 1939 the Alaska Road Commission finally quit maintaining its shelter cabins, ending an era in Alaska transportation.

Today the trail that crossed what is now the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has disappeared, the cabins lost in highway improvement or forest fire and only memories remain of the mail carriers who brought the good and sometimes the bad news from the outside world.

Gary Titus is the Wilderness Ranger, Cabin Manager and Historian at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.